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**Evolution of the concept of dukha from traditional to Contemporary: A critical evaluation**

Indian schools of philosophy were regarded of having a deep rooted metaphysical bent and diametrically opposite of Western concept of materialism and individualism. But, sometimes their overemphasis of *dukha* tagged them as pessimistic. However, the contemporary Indian thinkers conceived a different idea of world and *dukha*.Contrary to the notion of cessation of suffering after attaining the transcendental acquisition of liberation, contemporaray philosophers believed in attaining salvation in this life only. Their writings provide ample teachings of enjoying life’s bliss and attain the liberation in this worldly state by doing their obligations for others. This paper aims for a comparative study of the writings of contemporary thinkers like Rabindranath, Gandhi and Vivekananda and how they dealt with the idea of attaining liberation and cessation of suffering. Our paper would be study how the age old concept of *Advaitva Vedanta* takes a modified connotation in the philosophy of these thinkers.Moreover,our paper is a study to view the unique philosophy of life as proposed by them in their writings.

***Dukha and Mukti***

*Mukti* or freedom from suffering and worldly life is the much discussed topic among the schools of Indian Philosophy. Traditional schools of Indian philosophy consider that man in the mortal bodily existence is full of pain and suffering (*dukha).*Bodily existence is therefore a state of bondage conditioned by ignorance or *avidya* from which mortals strive for release. For achieving release from suffering, *avidya* should be eradicated by the knowledge of the light of reality (*tattvajnana)*.Liberation or *mukti* is a positive state which is gained by discarding all the delusions and wrong identification of the self-with the body. The state of redemption of freedom from suffering is state of eternal bliss which however should not be confused with any paradise or any bestowal from deities. The way of getting is to dispel all illusion or ignorance. Ignorance causes suffering which is a want of something more desirable, the incessant wish to lead the way of life in a different manner from the existing one. Thus suffering emerges from the sense of contrast between what is and what might have been, between the actual and the possible. In all the process man is conscious of the non-inevitability of the present situation and the grievance that it would have been otherwise, we could have done better.

***Traditional Schools of Indian Philosophy***

All the schools of Indian philosophy excluding the *Carvaka* consider that not only suffering as an actual state of painful feeling but also the entire phenomenal existence is due to suffering. The state of unpleasant feeling is simply an example of painful embodied existence. Even what we call pleasure is pain in the making as pleasure makes us hanker for more and the unfulfilled want creates agony. Moreover, prolonged agony begets frustration, anger and bitterness. It eventually leads to conflict and attaining it forcefully even at the expense of denying others share. Furthermore, too much obsession with pleasure of the immediate present resulted in shortsightedness which hinders our realization of *moksa*. However, what should be the nature of ignorance or *avidya* differs from system to system depending upon their different metaphysical standpoints. According to the Sankhyas when the *purusa* or soul wrongly identifies with object (*prakriti*) in its various modifications, then *avidya* creeps in keeping the *purusa* (soul) under bondage. It is only when the soul realizes it’s true nature, gets freed from *prakriti*, and attains liberation. Moreover, by *purusa*, Sankhya meant the soul which is otherwise inactive only gets activated when in contact with the object (*prakriti*).*Purusa* does not specify any male person rather a soul. *Advaita Vedanta* views Brahman as the fundamental reality underlying all objects and experiences. Brahman is the pure consciousness, pure existence and pure bliss. It is the all pervading awareness. The embodied souls are finite. When the veil of delusion or *maya* gets dissolved, the finite embodied soul identified itself with the infinite Brahman and achieves liberation. The *Vedanta* teaches that such a foundational soul is there and can be reached by the right kind of discipline. In Jainism, suffering is caused due to the intrusion of *Karmic* matter into the soul *(jiva)*.Early Buddhism views that the substance-idea itself causes dillusion.Moreover, we wrongly take things as permanent, but in reality they are changeable and perishable.*Avidya* is caused by the clinging to perishable things. The Mahayana Buddhists in their conception of *sunyata(*the indeterminate void)affirms the existence of a deep underlying reality behind all empirical manifestations .They also affirmed about *vijnaprimiitratii*(consciousness only),*tathata* (that-ness) and *dharmarii* (noumenal reality).Moreover, the solution for the cessation of suffering as offered by the *Vedanta* and the Mahayana Buddhism is the attainment of a positive state of fullness and the complete identification of the embodied self with all the beings. This is attributed as freedom or *mukti* in Vedanta. Moreover, this state is negative in so far as the “I” is dissociated from its accidental limited by the removal of ignorance. However, the state results in the positive and transcendental realization of the true nature of I as the absolute. The embodied self realizes the transitoriness of physical bodies and final dissolution of the worldly objects to the Brahman. However, the theistic school of *Saivism* and *Vaisnavism* conceives that the highest goal of the human life is the attainment of an intimate and inalienable relationship with God and not as complete identity. The traditional Indian schools might differ in their respective approaches for attainment of the absolute but they are unanimous on the point that suffering is inevitable in the embodied existence of the soul.

***World view through the lens of Contemporary Indian Thinkers***

The Contemporary Indian thinkers emerged mainly at the juncture when nascent nationalism was gaining grounds giving the once divided princely states to a pan Indian look. It can also be marked as the time of Indian Renaissance affecting India in general and Bengal in particular. Several factors shaped up the socio-political and religious thought of the time. First, was the constant influence of Renaissance and French Revolution on Indian intelligentsia which came through the Western influence due to frequent interactions of the so called Indian gentlemen class with the British. Moreover, the gentlemen class started adopting the western materialistic worldview and scientific approach. Moreover, English education was introduced by British government, however, for the not so good intention for manufacturing Indian clerks who could deliver cheap labour to her majesty as well as remain loyal. Furthermore, it is noticed that members of Indian gentlemen class begin to sail onboard to the west ignoring the taboo related to crossing the *kalapani* in the scriptures. Thus, personalities like Rammohan Roy brought the fresh influx of western science, materialism, language, and culture and women empowerment to the Indian shores. Notably, Rammohan Roy founded Brahmo Samaj in 1828, the monotheistic sect of Hinduism influenced by the monism of Advaita Vedanta. Brahmo Samaj discarded many superstitions relating to Hindu deity worship and customs. Moreover, there arose the group of Liberals or Modernists who were mainly members of Brahmo Samaj. Furthermore, they incorporated western cultural ethos in their daily lives. On the contrary, to maintain the balance there emerged another group in the society namely the traditionalists who preferred to stick to everything even the superstitions and whatever were tagged as Indian so far.Thus,Indian society started evolving in the dialectical process of constant tension between the Traditionalist and the Moderates.

***Orientalist influence***

The influence of Orientalist literature was also instrumental in shaping up a unique philosophy of life by the Contemporary thinkers. [[1]](#footnote-2)According to Edward Said, Orientalism was the knowledge of the orient produced by Englishmen not from any sympathetic attitude towards their culture but the knowledge was meant to serve the power structure of colonialism. Thus; Orientalist had a kind of dual purpose of improving the lives of Indian people and advancing arts and knowledge back in the heart of the Empire. Said had employed Michael Foucault’s concept of power knowledge and Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony to develop the new framework of Orientalism. However,Foucault’s argument that power and knowledge implicated each other was particularized by Said to ‘colonial power’ and ‘colonial knowledge’. The Orientalist writer was prone to present India as weak and vulnerable. John Stuart Mill claimed that liberty and representative Government could not be applied to India because Indians were civilizationally and if not racially inferior. Moreover, Said in his work *Orientalism* conceptually addressed the subaltern men and women to explain the Eurocentric perspective of the justifications of the dominations of the other by means of colonialism. Said was of view that the binary of “Us” and “Them” were created by Europeans to explain the differences between the Orient and the Occident. Moreover, the Orientalist scholar saw Indians as outside and opposite to the European Self. Furthermore, the British was seen as materialist in contrast to the emotional and spiritual Indian who appeared as essential and natural entities.Jouhki views that this fact is true to Indian Orientalism essentialism to a certain extent. Moreover, here Indian history is divided into a primeval event Vedic time as a golden age of India, and a time of degeneration of contemporary Indian society. Jouhki held that this division is noticeable in the discursive formations concerning Indian Hinduism. This position is also adopted by nationalistic Hindu leaders and intellectuals as well. According to Said, serious inquiries in the fields of Hindu and Muslim laws, Modern Politics, Geography of Hindustan(India), Arithmetic and Geometry, mixed science of the Asiatic, Medicine, Chemistry, Rhetoric and Morality of Asia, Music of Eastern Nations, Trade and Agricultural have been conducted (Said, 1977:191). In addition, the Hindu moral code (*Manushanhita*) and Hindu religious book (*Bhagavad-Gita*) have been translated, English Orientalist rewrote, distorted and manipulated the knowledge they received from their Indian interlocutors-partly through simple ignorance and misunderstanding but also to serve particular administration.[[2]](#footnote-3)Weber observed that India is essentially a magico-religious much in contrast of Europe which represented rationality. Weber claimed that science did not progress in India because Indians are concentrated in a religion that denigrated empirical world. (Badrinath 1984, cited in Jouhnki 2006:7).[[3]](#footnote-4) Moreover, the Orientalist interprets the Vedanta philosophy as “essentially mystical” which reflects the western prejudice about the Orientals as the ‘other’. The Western intellectuals have pointed out that the Orients have an idealist philosophy.

***Conflict between the Liberals and Moderates***

There remained always a conflict between the Liberals and the Radicals centering the religious dictums and its modes in the society. Such social tension led the social thinkers to ponder deep to discover a new interpretation of religion, specially developing a modern liberal worldview yet firmly rooted to the traditions. The new world view developed by the contemporary thinkers was mainly based on the new interpretation of the Vedanta, notion of *niskama karma* of *Gita* and the virtue of non violence. Although, the approach might differ from thinker to thinker but some basic principles remained the same. The contemporary thinkers refused to accept the idea of the traditional philosophers that suffering could only be denied if we only leave this mortal body and attain liberation through penance and acetic life. The traditionalists viewed that for the purpose of attaining *nirvana*, a strict livelihood bereft of materialism is necessary. And, above all renouncing of family life and taking refuge in the seclusion of forests or caves were highly recommended. Moreover, according to the traditionalist view, *garhasthya* or family life is shunned for the attainment of liberation. On the contrary, the contemporary thinkers believed that liberation could not and should not be attained shunning one’s duties. Moreover, to them liberation is a realization, a divinely feeling which is attained by the deliberation of one’s duties to others living in the mortal existence. Liberation lies in transcending the petty needs and selfishness of the biological self and realizing oneself in union with all the beings of the world. It is not attained in grandiosity of religious ceremonies or self imposed penance of acetic life. However, it comes naturally through love and sacrifice and helping the needy. Another, major difference between the traditional schools and the Contemporary thinkers is that they majorly believed in monotheism. Deity worship and elaborate rituals were completely discarded by them. Instead, they emphasized on men’s creativity and inner power of the soul.

Now, to understand the philosophy of contemporary thinkers we need to elucidate the thinking of some eminent thinkers. To make our discussion clear we would discuss in the views of three prominent thinkers: Vivekananda, Rabindranath and Gandhi.

***Swami Vivekananda and Practical Vedanta***

Swami Vivekananda is a great interpreter of Vedanta philosophy. Vivekananda proclaimed the *Advaita* view that behind the multiplicity of appearances in the world, there is one single truth. Vivekananda took his inspiration from philosophical traditions of India, China, Greece and Rome. The spiritual philosophy of the Vedanta, the integration of man with the cosmos influenced him. Moreover, it gives man the capacity to see the life as a whole. Thus this gives a non-sectarian view and enforces a belief in human freedom, creativity, dignity and responsibility to attain the permanent reality both within and without. Depending on *Vedantic* vision, Vivekananda developed his Humanism. He identified his humanism with the love and identification with all beings. His Guru, Sri Ramkrishna taught him the gospel of unfailing service to human beings, seeing *jiva* as *Siva*. From Sankaracharya he learnt the message of *Tattvamasi or aham Brahmasmi*. Thus, the only God to be worshipped according to Vivekananda is the human soul in the human body.Moreover; Vivekananda’s uniqueness was that he wanted to utilize *Vedanta* for the good of humanity. He lamented that so long *Vedanta* was only limited as esoteric knowledge of the few living isolated from the mundane. He brought *Vedanta* to everyday life of common people. He called his religion *‘Practical Vedanta’*. He viewed that one can perceive God and serve humanity and conversely also one can realize God by the service to all living beings, who are the embodiments of Brahman.Vivekananda’s humanism can be regarded as Spiritual humanism or Humanistic *Advaita* which regards man as God.Vivekanda’s spiritual humanism criticizes the social evils and customs and inculcated faith and self-reliance among teeming millions. Vivekananda begins with dualism, goes through a qualified monism and end in perfect monism.

***Rabindranath Tagore and the religion of man***

Rabindranath Tagore was born in one of the most elite Bengali family who were regarded as the harbinger of Bengal Renaissance. From his childhood Tagore was raised in an atmosphere where Upanisadic thoughts blossomed at par with European literature, music, science and culture. Tagore’s father, Debendranath Tagore was a nature lover. His frequent trips to Himalayas often accompanied by his youngest son Rabindranath inculcated a deep love and integration for nature in Rabindranath. Tagore from his childhood days was fascinated by the natural beauties of rising of the sun, chirping of birds and the whistling of winds through the trees. Since childhood, Tagore grew up bereft of any mother’s love or female company strictly under strong surveillance of servants which he called *Servocacy* in *Reminiscence*. Hence, nature occupied the place of a mother figure from his very childhood. Tagore views nature as essentially related to man and in a person’s self, nature’s true colours are revealed. Human personality could find fruition only through the realization of the feeling of intimacy with nature. We are not unknown strangers to natural diversities but the organic lives in nature are our kith and kin. According to Tagore, our relationship with nature comes in two senses. First is the objective biological bonding, which binds down nature to satisfy our physical and essential needs. Second, nature satisfies our personality with her manifestation making our lives rich and stimulates our imagination in the harmony of forms, colour, sounds and movements.Moreover, with the help of nature man creates his own nature. Man’s creativity, self expression, art and culture are developed.Furthermore; man becomes conscious of the *surplus* in him and he realizes his ability to transcend the physical finitude and to communicate with the Supreme person through his creative self. In this manner the Supreme Self reveals himself to man. Tagore believes that the unity of man and nature has its source in the One or the Absolute. Man’s creativity and personality goes together. Man comes out of his boundary of physical necessities and moved forward to realize the infinite run on two parallel lines-that of utility and of self-expression. The creation of art, music, painting and dance elevates man from a mere being to a personal man.[[4]](#footnote-5)Tagore says that man is truly represented in something which exceeds himself. He is aware that he is not imperfect, but incomplete.[[5]](#footnote-6)According to Tagore, the creative urge which is present in all men to transcend the biological is the **surplus in man**. Through man’s creativity he realizes the Supreme Person *(Jivan Devatā)* who has made this world so personal to man. Man attains his fulfillment when he feels his Infinity or the Divine which is the creator in him.Moreover, the purpose of religion according to Tagore is to bring man in harmony in reason, love and deed with the Supreme Person.[[6]](#footnote-7) Furthermore, the Supreme Person is such dependent upon the personal being as the latter is dependent on the former.Hence; in this sense God is also a personal being like man. Tagore developed the *Vedantic* concept of *Nara-Narayana* in his philosophy of Religion of Man. Tagore shunned the religious formalism and elaborate rituals and affirmed that God is not in lofty temples or grandeurs of sacrifices but he resides in every one of us in our everyday life. He is *Jivan Devata.* Hence, Tagore’s concept of Humanism is basically service to mankind.Hence, the Absolute One is manifested in all and one could only realize his unity with the Absolute through love, sympathy and harmony. Therein only the spiritual union is possible.

***Mahatma Gandhi***

Ahimsa is the main concept of the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi advocated that Truth is God and non-violence is the only means for the attainment of Truth. Gandhi was the first political activist in India who introduced spirituality in politics.Gandhiji adopted Satyagraha or non-violent resistance as the weapon to conquer political freedom.Gandhiji lead a highly moral life for him and as well advocated the same for his countrymen. Gandhi prescribed certain moral principles for the development of a man’s personality. They are 1) *Ahimsa* or Non-violence, 2) *Brahmacharya* or Chastity, 3) Non-possession, 4) Fearlessness, and 5) Self-purification. Apart from these Gandhi added six more vows to be followed by spiritual seeker. They are 1. Bread- labour 2. Swadeshi 3. Control of the plate 4. Fearlessness 5. Equal respect for all religions 6. Removal of untouchability.

Gandhiji exercised ahimsha in order to bring out the true meaning of Ahimsha.He applied the Jaina concept of Ahimsa from an individual principle to the mass level. Literally Ahimsa means non-killing. But, Gandhi’s denotation of Ahimsa is much broader. It is the superior force which surpasses all other forces. Thus the prefix non in it is not any negative but implies in positive sense will force and courage.Ahimsa implies love for all beings and non-hatred in thought, deed and words. It is something very positive.

Gandhiji was highly influenced by the *Bhagavad Gita*. *Gita* speaks of *jivamukti* when the man lives this life but he remains totally detached. He neither feels any attachment nor any anger or aversion. Gandhiji believed in *jivamukti*, and in the cult of working without any attachment or aversion. He believed in the *niskama karma* preached in *Gita* which is the art of working without any desire for the attainment of fruits. Gandhi says that we should work as trustees of wealth and prosperity and never held them as our own. The wealth should be divided among the poor for their living. Gandhi believed in simplicity. Radhakrishnan also believes that one does enter the life of ascetics until he has fulfilled his obligations to his fellowmen.

Thus, the Contemporary Indian thinkers advocated a life of service and living in harmony with fellow beings.

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